

Snaring Terrorists, Not Tourists

By Rep. Louise M. Slaughter

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Kenmore and the Town of Tonawanda lie on the edge of America's vast northern border, which spans twelve states and over 4,000 miles. For years we have enjoyed a free and open border with our Canadian neighbors. But new security concerns since the terrorist attacks of September 11 have changed the way we do business at our borders.

Higher security levels have put an extra burden on the Customs and Border Patrol personnel who patrol and perform inspections at points of entry, adding to the growing problem of congestion at our bridges. From the Peace Bridge in Buffalo up to the Queenston Lewiston Bridge in Niagara County, long lines are causing our region major inconveniences, increased air pollution and are even harming local businesses.

While the official points of entry at our bridges are clogged, the rest of the northern border remains dangerously porous. Illegal immigration challenges at the Mexican/American border have long over shadowed the need to increase security up north. Though we have made some good progress along the northern border since 2001, staffing there still accounts for less than 10 percent of overall Border Patrol agent manpower. It is impossible to guard every inch of border 24 hours a day, but we must still do better to ensure it is properly monitored.

As a senior member of the House Select Committee on Homeland Security, I am working to solve the question of how to increase security along the northern border, while not impeding business and tourist travel. Last week, my colleagues and I introduced the SECURE Border Act, which we hope will make the improvements needed to secure our borders.

An important part of the bill includes legislation that I introduced that would create a Northern Border Coordinator within the Department of Homeland Security. This official would serve as the primary official responsible for coordinating federal homeland security activities along the border.

Our bill would also create a \$1 billion Land Border Infrastructure Improvement Fund for infrastructure investments. Right now, our homeland security upgrades must compete with other road and highway projects for federal support. This fund would help ensure that projects like the Peace Bridge expansion get the money they need.

The SECURE Act also supports expanding pre-enrollment programs like FAST and NEXUS, which allow pre-cleared travelers to cross the border more quickly in designated lanes. In addition, our bill will double the number of Customs and Border personnel, which could help reduce congestion at our bridges and better patrol the more remote parts of the border.

Securing the nation's northern border is a monumental task that will take cooperation among local, state and national officials, as well as collaboration with our counterparts in Canada. I will continue to look for efficient ways to enhance security along our borders to snare terrorists, not tourists.